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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of skits and dialogues in a first-year Chinese course to help novice learners enhance their communicative skills. Because novice learners of Chinese lack the appropriate vocabulary and grammar knowledge to express themselves freely, skits can help them use their limited knowledge to communicate in an effective manner. Starting from lesson 13, the novice learners present one short skit per lesson, focusing on such topics as making an acquaintance or shopping in a store. Empirical experience based on oral-proficiency orientated teaching has shown that beginning students are able to use their very limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge to make interesting skits that enhance their communicative skill. (MDM)

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Using Skits to Enhance Beginners' Communicative Skill

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ABSTRACT

Novice-learners of Chinese lack the appropriate vocabulary and grammar knowledge to express themselves freely. Empirical experience based on oral-proficiency oriented teaching has shown that beginning students are able to use their very limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge to make interesting skits to enhance their communicative skill.

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1. Theoretical background

It is a fact that novice-learners[1] of Chinese are able to produce orally only isolated words and perhaps a few high-frequency phrases such as "nǐ hǎo, qǐng jìn, qǐng zuò, ..."; they essentially have no functional communicative ability, since they lack the appropriate lexical and syntactical knowledge to express themselves. Should instructors wait till they are armed with the adequate linguistic skills to request them to make meaningful dialogues in a formal classroom environment? Our empirical experience has shown that these novice-learners are up to the task. We would like to share our experience with our colleagues for their comments and suggestions.

The theoretical framework which has guided our practice is based on McLaughlin's (1979) theory on L2 acquisition. McLaughlin suggests a distinction between controlled and automatic processing in L2 acquisition. In controlled processing, the individual activates a temporary sequence of nodes in short-term memory to carry out a cognitive task. Such a process requires the individual's active attention, even though he may not always perceive the process consciously or be able to verbalize it. In this view of cognitive processing, learning is defined as the transfer of information from short-term to long-term memory. Because controlled processes regulate the flow of information into the long-term store, they underlie all learning. In automatic processing, a sequence of nodes almost always becomes activated in response to a particular input configuration, without necessitating

active control or attention by the individual. Automatic processes use a relatively permanent set of associative connections in long-term memory, and once learned, these responses are difficult to suppress or alter. Since Mclaughlin's automatic processes are learned after the earlier used of controlled processes, in L2 learning the initial stage would require the use of controlled processes in order to perform accurately, albeit slowly. But as the materi[illegible]becomes more familiar, automatic processes would develop, so that eventually accurate production would demand less attention and allow for faster and more fluent output (p.319). McLaughlin is suggesting that learners can and do use what they "learn," such as rules and memorized material, to generate utterances at first, and that with practice and repeated application of such learning to their output, the processing of language production and comprehension eventually becomes automatic and quite subconscious.

2. Rationale

Based on Mclaughlin's theory, we have decided to request novice-learners to practice skits as early as during the first week immediately after the pronunciation has been completely introduced. The rationale behind our decision stemmed from the following considerations. Traditional classroom instructional settings tend to limit learners' role to that of responders: learners are most often asked to answer questions; they are very rarely asked to carry out other language functions, such as persuading, describing, narrating, and giving commands, which are necessary in everyday encounters with native Chinese speakers in real communication.

Quite often, functional practice of this sort is reserved for intermediate and advanced conversation courses which the majority of learners never take. Skits introduce novice-learners to a variety of functional tasks sequenced to help them cope with the real-world communication demands they will face. The following convictions have led us to shape our instruction:

1. Opportunities must be provided for novice-learners to practice using Chinese in a range of contexts. Therefore, they should be encouraged to express their own meaning after the pronunciation has been introduced.

2. Opportunities should be provided for novice-learners to practice carrying out a range of functions such as making inquiries, acting out simulated survival situations, narrating or describing events, hypothesizing, arguing, persuading, providing opinion, etc., likely to be necessary in dealing with native speakers in communication.

3. Instructional activities should respond to the affective needs of novice-learners as well as to their cognitive needs. Novice-learners should feel motivated to learn and must be given opportunities to express their own meanings in a nonthreatening environment.

4. There should be concern for the development of linguistic accuracy from the beginning of instruction.

3. Procedures

The entire process consists of two steps: (1) preparation and (2) practice.

3.1. Preparation

Our first-year Chinese is using the textbook Practical Chinese Reader Vol. I where the first 12 lessons are dedicated to the acquisition of pronunciation. Starting from Lesson 8 where novice-learners have acquired 52 characters and 46 set phrases and sentences, we are providing with them at the end of the instruction of each lesson a mini-skit as a listening comprehension exercise. The preparation of these mini-skits observes the following principles:

1. No new characters should be introduced.

2. New phrases from the new combinations of the acquired characters should be provided.

3. The content should be meaningful.

These principles are illustrated by some samples:

Sample 1 (For Lesson 8)

- knock, knock.
- 请问？
- 是我，王二。
- 是您呀，王先生，请进，请进。
- 您好。
- 您好。您爸爸妈妈好吗？
- 他们都很好。您忙吗？
- 我不忙。请喝茶。

- 谢谢。

- 不客气。

- 这是那国茶？

- 这是中国茶。您喝酒吗？

- 谢谢，我不喝酒。这是什么？

- 这是中国地图。您看，这是北京，那是上海。我是北京人，我太太是上海人。您也是北京人吗？

- 不是，我是上海人。我哥哥，我弟弟也都是上海人。

- 您哥哥是大夫吗？

- 不是，他是老师。他是汉语老师。谢谢您的茶。您的茶很好喝。再见。

- 再见。

Sample 2 (For Lesson 12)

- 請問！請進。
- 您好，王老師。
- 您好，吉安。請坐。請喝茶。
- 謝謝。您的茶很好喝。是外國茶嗎？
- 不是。是中國茶。您說怪嗎？
- 謝謝。我不說怪。請問，您認識ＸＸＸ嗎？
- 認識。他常在這兒。我們是很好的朋友。
- 他是哪國留學生？
- 他是美國留學生。
- 他學習什麼？
- 他學習漢語。他女朋友也在這兒學習漢語。
- 他女朋友叫什麼名字？
- 他女朋友姓丁，叫丁雲。
- 是啊呀，他是我的學生。請問，ＸＸＸ現在住哪兒？
- 他住在外語學院學生宿舍。
- 多少號？
- 六樓 204 號。
- 他的電話號碼是多少？
- 475-8904。

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- 我去他宿舍還他書報，謝典.
- 那是什麼謝典?
- 法語詞典.

- 我用一下兒，好嗎?
- 好.
- 謝謝.
- 不用謝.

The purpose of these mini-skits is twofold: on the one hand, they develop the novice-learners' listening proficiency, and on the other, they constitute models for them in preparing their own skits in the future.

Organizationally, from day one the novice-learners are paired at their own choice for drills in the classroom. Therefore, when comes the time for skits, the pairs have already worked together for a relatively long period so that they are able to meet after classes for preparing the skits.

Thus, linguistically and organizationally, the novice-learners have five lessons (Lessons 8 - 12) to be trained and prepared for the task.

3.2. Practice

Starting from Lesson 13, the novice-learners have to present a skit per lesson. The theme of their skits is announced ahead of time, usually two or three days in advance: it always corresponds to that of each lesson so that the learners have sufficient vocabulary and grammar structures for constructing their skits.

During the presentation of skits, learners are both presenters-speakers and participants-listeners. As presenters-speakers, they pass from rote imitation, simple memorization, and exclusively manipulative oral exercises to more creative language use; they use the vocabulary and grammar structures they have been learning and practicing in other drill sequences. In all cases, they are encouraged to use personal and creative expressions. As participants-listeners, they take in raw speech in short-term

memory; they then try to identify both the content and the function or purpose of the linguistic information. This information is subsequently grouped together for forming a coherent message, which is held in long-term memory as a reconstructed meaning rather than in its original form. In addition to storing the meaning of the message (its content), they also try to determine the presenters-speakers' intentions, calling upon their knowledge of the situation,.

Our novice-learners are enthusiastic in accomplishing the task: they make simple props and are dressed up in costumes. The skits are frequently interrupted by laughter. Two samples are given below as an illustration[2]:

Sample 1 (For Lesson 13, Theme: Making an acquaintance)

A: 谁啊?

B: 胡容丽.

A: 请进. 欢迎, 欢迎. 你好.

B: 你好. 你爸爸、你妈妈、你哥哥、你弟弟都好吗.

A: 他们都很好, 你妈妈呢?

B: 她也很好. 谢谢.

A: 请坐, 你喝茶吗?

B: 谢谢你.

A: 不客气，你吸烟不吸烟？

B: 谢谢，我不吸烟，请问您贵姓？

A: 我姓白，我叫白安德。

B: 你朋友在哪儿？

A: 她现在在北京大学

B: 她忙吗？

A: 她很忙，她学习汉语和法语，你是美国留学生吗？

B: 对了，我在北京外语学院学习汉语。

A: 我是大夫，我也是英语老师，你认识那个人不认识？

B: 他是我的男朋友。

A: 我不认识他，请你给我们介绍一下儿。

B: 好，我给你们介绍，你住哪儿？

A: 我住这儿，你在哪儿住？

B: 我住在宿舍。

A: 你住几层？

B: 三层。

A: 多少号?

B: 561 号。

A: 你的电话号码是多少?

B: 一二三四五六七。这是什么?

A: 这是书，请你看。

B: 谢谢。我去商店。

A: 我也去商店买笔、纸、画报、本子和词典。

B: 你常不常坐车去商店?

A: 不常，我常坐车来宿舍。

B: 啊。

Sample 2 (For Lesson 16, Theme: Shopping)

(在银行)

A: 我想买一支笔.

B: 我没有笔. 这是银行, 不是书店.

A: 啊, 再见.

(在商店)

A: 我想买一支笔.

B: 我没有笔, 这不是书店. 你想买一件衬衫吗?

A: 你有绿的吗?

B: 没有. 我有黑的.

A: 不好. 我想买一条白裤子.

B: 我没有白的.

A: 你没有白的? 你有蓝衬衫吗?

B: 有.

A: 这件衬衫太大. 这件是蓝的吗? 这件不是蓝的, 这件是绿的.

B: 你很笨. 这件是蓝的.

A: 我不买.

B: 这件是蓝的，你买.

A: 我不买，再见.

（在书店）

A: 你在银行工作吗？

B: 不对，那是我妹妹.

A: 哎，你有笔吗？

B: 我现在没有.你想不想买法文书？

A: 我不说法语.

B: 这本书很好看，请看.

A: 我不说法语，我不买.

B: 你想买词典吗？

A: 这本词典太旧.

B: 你去看京剧吗？

A: 不去.

B: 你想买两张票吗？

A: 不想。

B: 你有女朋友吗？

A: 有。

B: 你给你女朋友买两张票吧。

A: 我不买。我想回家，再见。

B: 唉，别走。买不买着车？

A: 不买，再见。

B: 再见。

4. Pedagogical Requisites

4.1. Coherence

Widdowson (1978) makes the fundamental distinction between cohesion and coherence. Cohesion is concerned with the way propositions are linked structurally in a text (oral or written) and how the literal meaning of a text is interpreted. Coherence refers to the ways contextual meanings are related and linked in the parts of the discourse. Coherence is achieved by the continuity of thought or meaning, the development of ideas previously expressed, the internal consistency of the discourse, and the congruity of the parts of the text to one another. Therefore, we request the learners to make both cohesive and coherent skits.

4.2. Accuracy

Higgs and Clifford (1982) point out that there appears to be a real danger of leading learners too rapidly into the "creative aspects of language use," in that if successful communication is encouraged and rewarded for its own sake, the effect seems to be one of rewarding at the same time the incorrect communication strategies seized upon in attempting to deal with the communication sitations presented. When these reinforced communication strategies fossilize prematurely, their subsequent modification or ultimate correction is rendered difficult to the point of impossibility. Thus, we must recognize the ultimate role that linguistic accuracy will play in the achievement of true communicative competence and build toward accuracy from the first day of instruction. Canale and Swain (1980) further note that there

seems to be no strong theoretical reasons for emphasizing getting one's meaning across over grammatical accuracy at the early stages of second language learning. In fact, there seem to be a number of reasons for not doing so. They suggest that the best approach might be one which begins with a combination of emphasis on grammatical accuracy and on meaningful communication, where such communication is organized according to the basic communication needs of the learner and where "knowledge of idiosyncratic appropriateness conditions in the second language" is not required to any great extent. We believe that instructors should help novice-learners build toward accuracy from the beginning of instruction. It should be clear that "building toward accuracy" does not imply that novice-learners should be expected to produce only correct utterances. Learners obviously do not generally produce correct speech when creating with the language. Because the usage of skits encourage novice-learners to create with Chinese and express their own meaning from the beginning of instruction, errors of all types are to be expected. We might, however, be able to help learners produce more accurate speech if we provide comprehensible input in addition to formal instruction and encourage learners to express their own meaning within the limits of their current level of competence, and consistently provide corrective feedback.

As for the correction of errors, we never interrupt learners' presentation; instead, we take notes of their errors and provide corrections after their presentation is completed. Thus, learners would not be disrupted and become nervous.

4.3. Nonthreatening Environment

Brown (1984) argues that we can assume to some extent that lowered anxiety and inhibition will increase comprehensible input and therefore acquisition. In addition, he points out that although too much anxiety may have harmful effects on learning, too little anxiety can also cause failure. If a learner's affective filter is too low, there may be little motivation to learn. "We do well to note that anxiety can be debilitative but it can also be facilitative ... As teachers we should allow some of the anxiety and tension to remain in our classes lest our students become so 'laid back' that they fail to perceive the input when it comes (p.278). Students will probably attain a given degree of proficiency more rapidly in an environment such as presenting skits which is relaxed and personalized.

5. Conclusion

Novice-learners are able to use their very limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge to make interesting skits to enhance their communicative skill.

NOTES

1. Our beginners' classes include "false" beginners, that is, students who, fluent in Chinese, have no orthographic knowledge. The novice-learners refer to "true" beginners, that is, students who have not been previously exposed formally to Chinese.
2. The samples have been edited.

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